DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 447 490 CS 217 286

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TITLE Hereisthehouse: Critical Paper.
PUB DATE 2000-07-00
NOTE 24p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *American Dream; *Black Family; *Cultural Context; Literary Criticism; *Novels; *Racial Bias
IDENTIFIERS *Bluest Eye (The); Dystopia; *Morrison (Toni); Textual Analysis

ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's vision of America juxtaposes the rubble and rabble of a silent, screaming America against an affluent America that cannot hear. In "The Bluest Eye" she offers a poignant portrayal of the bastardization of the American Dream: opportunity has become entitlement, success has been translated in currency. This paper analyzes the text of Morrison's novel, which tells the story of the Breedlove family. The paper views Pecola Breedlove as the most tragic character and finds that the novel chronicles Pecola's futile struggle against an assault that she cannot identify and that she certainly cannot understand--the silent assault of racism. Each chapter of the novel is introduced with an excerpt from "Dick and Jane," the primary school basal reader in which all children live harmoniously and prosperously with Mother and Father in a tidy little house. In "The Bluest Eye" Morrison does not prescribe a panacea for the dystopian ills of American society but offers up conflict, injustice, inequality, abuse, prejudice, intolerance, and inhumanity for the reader's critical examination. (NKA)

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Critical Paper

Does art have a moral responsibility? To whom? To what? To the truth, certainly. But whose truth? And which truth? In a purely aesthetic concern, answers to these questions seem easily available. The author has an indisputable obligation to the truth of her vision, of the reality which she shapes. But what of those fundamental truths embraced and espoused by a society? What is the artist's duty to these?

One of America's "truths" claims that all men and women in this society have the opportunity to participate in this democracy as equal citizens. We are ensured the right of our freedom which, as differentiated from our license, requires us to coordinate the good of the whole with the well-being of the individual. We believe that we are guaranteed that our right to pursue happiness is commensurate with our neighbors. Our mythos claims that we all have the right to dream of and the opportunity to create a better life for ourselves and for our children. What, then does the artist do when she is witness to the abridgement of this "truth"? Does she have a duty to decry its defamation? Philosophers such as David Purpel and Palo Frerie believe so. Toni Morrison concurs with Purpel and Frerie that it is the obligation of the artist to condemn the disparity between the promise and the reality. In **The Bluest Eye,** Morrison incites a public consciousness; she invites us to witness this disparity and to consider the complex complicity that allows it to be so.

Toni Morrison's vision of America juxtaposes the rubble and the rabble of a silent, screaming America against an affluent America that cannot hear. **The Bluest Eye** offers a

poignant portrayal of the bastardization of the American dream: opportunity has become entitlement, success has been translated in currency. In this novel, she represents the waste, the refuse of America, living on the margins of prosperity, the "good life." This is a story of human tragedy of the most obscene magnitude; the tragedy is made greater still in its ignorance of itself. The victims lie fallen; the predator is oblivious of his kill.

> Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before." (Morrison **Playing in the Dark** 63).

In the novel's opening lines, Morrison succinctly and profoundly establishes the stark metaphor for the dystopian dream, the dream that is truncated for a vast contingent of the population before it can construct itself in recognizable syntax. An excerpt from the basal reader series featuring Dick and Jane is quickly distorted beyond recognition: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family . . . . Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty. . . . Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasreddoorsitisverypretty . . ." (1-2).

The Dick and Jane story is further subverted by contusions to the story like: Jane can't find a playmate, Dick can't be found, the kitten won't play—still Mother laughs and Father smiles. The passage is compressed into deformity with each repetition until it is rendered incomprehensible. So too is Pecola's family. Under the pressures of economic impoverishment and enduring the past and present effects of racism, the entire family is unable to hold its shape, to recognize its own syntax. An epigraph follows the first introductory Chapter:

> HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETT YITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYP (24).

The key word in this passage is "pretty." It is repeated four times, but on the fifth attempt, the repetition is aborted following the "p." The word has no real existence in this section of the narrative which describes the storefront home where the Breedloves lived ". . . nestled together in the debris of a realtor's whim" (25). There is nothing intrinsically pretty about the house. In fact, it is hideous to Pauline, Pecola's mother, as it contrasts with her assumed white, middle-class standards of what *is* beautiful.

Morrison uses the rest of the Dick and Jane story to preview and to parallel the deterioration of the Breedlove family. The next section features the word "happiness" to equally dissatisfying ends. The word is repeated several times and then once again slashed mid-repetition. There is no happiness in their lives. Pauline's life has been stunted economically and intellectually. Cholly, her husband, has been contorted beyond recognition. He was alienated long ago by a mother who deserted him and a father who rejected him. His exposure to racism has emasculated him. One incident in his adolescence especially continues to oxidize his sense of manhood and masculinity. As a

teenager engaging in sexual intercourse with an encouraging partner, Cholly was discovered by two white men.

> There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it. Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns . . .
>
> "Get on wid it, nigger," said the flashlight one. . . . An' make it good, nigger, make it good."
>
> . . . With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear . . . Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind. . . . Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. (116)

The humiliation was deep. Hate lodged in Cholly like a bomb waiting to be detonated. However, Cholly was wise enough, educated enough in the lessons of racism to understand that the shrapnel must not hit a white target—not a white target. And so hate becomes circumspect. Cholly hates himself. He hates the color of his skin. He hates the color of his neighbors' skin. His blackness is a ubiquitous reminder that as a man and as a human being, he is not good enough. However, this contradicts what he was implicitly promised as his birthright. His legacy as an American, as a man, as a citizen is an automatic sharehold in the promise of inalienable rights—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness, and yet the color of his skin has disenfranchised him. By virtue of his blackness he is not the beneficiary of this inheritance, of these guarantees. As a man and

as a citizen, he invests his dreams in a future of possibility, only to find that there are caveats on this Dream. America has betrayed him because he is not good enough.

Nor had he ever been good enough. It is not only the white world which denies Cholly his value as a human being. Abandoned at birth, "Aunt Jimmy raised Cholly herself and took delight sometimes in tellin him of how she had saved him" (103). When she dies Cholly goes in search of his father, "that Fuller boy, I believe it was" (103), his aunt had told him when he had asked. When he finds Samson Fuller dicing in an alley in Macon, he is told by his father to "get the fuck outta my face" (123).

Cholly seeks and finds comfort with three prostitutes who "give him back his manhood" (124), and Morrison says that Cholly is free:

> Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep. Free to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it. He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say, "No, suh," and smile, for he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick, or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness, for he had already been a gandy dancer, done thirty days on a chain gang, and picked a woman's bullet out of the calf of his leg. He was free to live his fantasies, and free to die, the how and the when of which held no interest

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> for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father . . . he was alone . . . (125-126)

It is clear that Morrison speaks not merely of Cholly in this passage; she convenes all of the Chollys of our society. Nor does she really speak of freedom; she captures the illusion of freedom when one has nothing else to lose. Morrison proposes that Cholly has the license to destroy himself if he isn't first destroyed by a society which subordinates him, a society which reviles him, a society which refuses to see him as anything more valuable than a blemish on the white landscape: "It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, 'You are ugly people.' They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (28). In this prognosis, we should despair, but we don't. However, we don't despair because Morrison sates us, misleads us with a metaphor of hope.

In fact, Morrison entices the reader with hope, but it is a false hope. She entitles her Chapters with seasons of the year suggesting the restorative cycle of the universe. So, as we begin in autumn, we are prepared for its decay; we can withstand the dormancy of winter because we are certain we will witness renewal and fecundity in spring and summer. However, these seasons malfunction as the beginning of the text reflects in a retrospective prologue. Morrison's agenda is clearly represented here as is Pecola's plight. Pecola has been raped by her father, Cholly, assaulted by the degradation of her color and her brown eyes, and, finally, she is left only the consolation of her madness—her

need to possess the bluest eyes, to be equal to the children her mother cares for in the white house, to be loved as they are.

> Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. (3)

Claudia's observation is clear and profound. With the uncluttered vision of a child, Claudia says that she and Frieda and Pauline and Cholly and Pecola and every other child and adult assumed an equal membership in this society as a free and responsible citizen; each assumed that he or she held commensurate stock in the American Dream—each could plant his or her seeds and watch them grow. As Americans, they placed their faith in the "bootstrap" operation—with the right proportion of hard work, magic and luck, they too could see, would see the birth of something beautiful. But they were wrong.

In this opening Chapter of the novel, Claudia reflects that she now understands their wrongness. In her conclusions, she expands Morrison's paradigm by realizing that opportunity and promise—the magic potion—is the alchemy of only a select membership within this society; and therefore, there is a fundamental and insidious misrepresentation of which only a very few are aware but of which many are victim. Morrison's intent is clear.

Here, at the outset of the novel, Morrison suggests a shared blame—among blacks, whites, tall and small—and a shared responsibility to address this heinous wrong, this selective democracy. Claudia notes that the first response of the victim is to become melancholic and circumspect in the loss of one's freedom, in the abridgement of one's rights. However, to wallow in such an individual response, to isolate one's self from a larger reality is to perpetuate the cycle of loss. It is this very response, the response that isolates the individual from the larger community, that destroys Cholly, destroys Pauline, destroys Pecola. As Claudia continues, Morrison requires us to consider the consequence of our failure to recognize a collective plight and responsibility. Naivete, anger, covetousness, self-recrimination, pity are not the tools of change. The collective response and responsibility of the micro and macro communities are critical to a true democracy—one which embraces *all* of its membership with dignity and justice. Until we recognize this, Morrison suggests that we will continue to reinfect ourselves as a society with the convoluted and impotent exchange of blame and guilt.

> It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding

> earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.
>
> There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how. (3)

Claudia, Morrison's narrator, admits that Pecola's story is so painful to narrate that one must "take refuge in how" this tragedy came to be. The "why's" are too staggering, too hurtful. This pain is centered in the nervous system of a race dominated, not merely in Pecola's story. It is the story of self-loathing, not just of Pecola because she doesn't measure well against the American standard of beauty, but this is the self-hate of a nation of black people who, like Claudia, somehow stand accused for their failure to prosper and unwittingly accept the blame. Morrison layers the metaphor powerfully. Claudia narrates what happened to her friend, but the narrative encircles Claudia too. We discover her world as she does, a world that includes overworked mothers who clean up after their children and who don't want their children to die, a world in which adults issue orders without providing information as to why, a world where bad things happen. By the end of the novel, Claudia assumes the guilt for Pecola's downfall. Claudia recognizes, and she is the only character who does, that a certain element of Pecola's insanity lies within every member of the community. The community knows, at least theoretically, the toll of internalizing racism. They have a responsibility, a duty to root it out of the black imagination before it subsumes an identity as it has with Pecola.

The novel chronicles Pecola Breedlove's futile struggle against an assault that she can't identify and that she certainly can't understand—the silent assault of racism. However, Pecola is not the first of her family to suffer at the hands of racism. Clearly, her doom is

rooted in the unrelenting denigration of her parents, of her race, and their unwitting compliance with this victimization. Cholly, Pecola's father, has been rendered psychically impotent; he has been stripped of what little dignity he might have possessed by his inability to stabilize his family economically in a world that demands that he must but makes it virtually impossible for him to do so. This emasculation is made more portentous by Pauline Breedlove's infatuation with American movie aesthetics and middle-class standards of taste and value. She has abandoned her family emotionally and spiritually, identifying more closely with the family of her employer than her own. She is not available to support, sustain, or nurture her husband or her daughter. In fact, her loathing of both is palpable; both are reminders of what she would like to forget—her blackness.

Pauline's violation of Pecola is as damaging as the rape inflicted by Cholly.

> Another door opened, and in walked a little girl, smaller and younger than all of us. She wore a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips. Her hair was corn yellow and bound in a thick ribbon.
>
> "Where's Polly," she asked. [And she goes off in search of Pecola's mother.]
>
> [Claudia, Frieda and Pecola are left standing in the kitchen of the white family for whom Pauline works, staring at a deep-dish blueberry cobbler.] It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand

knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, her leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication.

"Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy. . . ." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread.

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." (84-85)

Our inclination is to condemn Pauline unilaterally for her pernicious abuse of very own uncomprehending child. And certainly, Pauline is not absolved of her guilt; however, she too is an unsuspecting victim of an invisible standard and expectation.

Pauline Williams Breedlove, by her own admission was happiest when she went to the movies. *"I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers [Jean Harlow] on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. Well, almost just like* [In this paper, all italicized words within quotations replicate the text.]" (96). Her delusion persists until one day, she took a big bite of candy and pulled a front tooth out. She says that until that point, her teeth were healthy; however, the narrator instructs: "To find out the truth about how dreams die, one should never take the word of the dreamer" (86). Pauline, in fact, has a crippled, archless foot that flops unattractively when she walks. She is abandoned in way much more subtle than Cholly. ". . . This deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny

things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences . . . (86). However, it is not until Pauline pulls out her front tooth that she resigns herself to her ugliness, blaming the missing tooth for all the misery which follows this resignation: "*Look like I just didn't care no more after that*" (96). The narrator eulogizes Pauline's loss:

> But there must have been a speck, a brown speck easily mistaken for food but which did not leave, which sat on the enamel for months, and grew, until it cut into the surface and then to the brown putty underneath, finally eating away to the root, but avoiding the nerves, so its presence was not noticeable or uncomfortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place. (91)

Morrison's metaphor is clear. Following the loss of her tooth, Pauline settles "*down to just being ugly*" (98). In so concluding, she abrogates any value, any dignity she may have possessed. It was inevitable that Pauline would come to this; even that modicum of dignity lived on borrowed time. Pauline has no sense that she is hostage to "conditions" which expect her to supplant her own innate beauty with the Shirley Temple/Jean Harlow demigod image of womanhood: "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (95). Morrison's implications are most startling. Pauline is not merely Pecola's mother, she is not merely another black woman, representative of many black women, who has been duped by the American standard of beauty and value, she is an accomplice to the racism that subjugates her. It is

not without sympathy that Morrison condemns her, but the author does, nonetheless, condemn her. The inevitability of Pauline's resignation to "*being ugly*" does not excuse her from her responsibility to examine the individual and the communal failure to prosper. She accepted without question. Without examination. She clicked her heels together, she waited to be rescued by her prince charming, she lost herself in the magic of fairy godmothers, she bought the myth that belongs to blue eyes and white skin. Without question. Without examination. And thus, she became part of the problem rather than a piece of the solution.

The most acutely tragic of Morrison's victims is Pecola. Pecola suffers her fate at the hands of poverty: poverty of the spirit, poverty of affection; poverty of an exclusionary aesthetic; poverty of denied aspirations. Pecola walks down Garden Avenue with three pennies sliding between her sock and the inner sole of her shoe. Her destination is Yacobowski's Fresh Vegetable Meat and Sundries Store. She will buy *Mary Janes*. The blue-eyed Mr. Yacobowski ". . . senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance . . . 'Yeah?' She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness . . . . She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness" (37-37). Intimidated by her invisibility, she merely points to the Mary Janes that she would like to exchange for her three pennies. "'Christ. Kantcha talk?" (37). The acrimony is not lost on Pecola. "Outside Pecola feels the inexplicable shame" (37). And the dandelions that she so admired on her way to the store are transformed: "A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, 'They are ugly. They are weeds'" (37). And so to is Pecola.

Pecola knows she is ugly. She is the sum total of Cholly and Pauline. She is not good enough; she is ugly. Pecola understands this at the most visceral, most fundamental level of her existence. She desperately wants to be good enough, beautiful enough to be loved, to be valued by Pauline and by Cholly. And yet, they tell her she is neither loved nor valued. She is ugly enough to be reviled by Pauline who instead showers her unmitigated affection on the blue-eyed child with the corn-yellow hair. She is unvalued enough to be the victim of Cholly's violence. She is raped as the surrogate object of his rage. She knows she deserves to be raped. She knows she deserves to be unloved. Pecola knows she is not good enough to reverse any of these things—unless she can somehow possess the bluest eyes. She must have eyes the color of the mutilated, white doll she admires whose one remaining eye is blue. Ironically, she knows that she must become the oppressor not to be the oppressed. She turns to Soaphead Church for help. Soaphead is the self-designed and self-assigned minister to whom the women of the town have ascribed supernatural powers. "It occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (34). Pecola turns to him to save her from her blackness.

Soaphead's momentary reticence was quickly replaced by an urgency to help this deluded child, and so he performed the miracle. "Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. . . . His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time, he honestly wished he could work miracles. . . . With a trembling hand he

made the sign of the cross over her" (138). Pecola had been saved. She retreated into her madness with eyes that would expiate the pain of her blackness, with Shirley Temple, Barbie Doll eyes that make the life within the parameters of Dick and Jane the "good life." She could no longer be dominated by a world that was aesthetically and economically "superior." She was a part of that world now, if only in her madness. She now had value. Claudia concludes: "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (162).

In this account, Morrison indicts the illusion that all is well in the land of the free and the brave. It is an invective decrying the Anglo-Saxon standards of physical beauty as a measure of self-worth and a Dick and Jane middle-class life style as the norm against which we judge and value our lives. However, in her condemnation, Morrison includes a commensurate reprimand to the sub-culture which endorses these false standards and which accepts the vapid values which will only ensure the continued subjugation of these black people. Junior, whose mother explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers, is "sugar-brown" like his mother.

> Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressin on him, smell their wild blackness, and say 'Fuck you' with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on curbstones and compare the sharpness of jackknives . . . Bay Boy and P. L. had at one time been his idols. Gradually he came to agree with his mother that neither Bay Boy nor P. L. was good enough for him. (68)

However, lest we too soon lend our sympathy and our compassion to Bay Boy and P. L.:

> A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove. Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson, Junie Bug . . . surrounded her. Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of the majority, they gaily harassed her.
>
> 'Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked. Black e moe . . .'
>
> They had extemporized a verse made up of too insults about matters over which the victim had no control; the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult . . . It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (50)

In this, we see that Morrison is inclusive in her reprimand. When rape occurs no one is exonerated except perhaps the victim. And it occurs daily in our society. It is part of our micro history; it is part of our macro history. As Pecola was raped, so was Cholly, and so was Pauline, and so was Claudia, and so was Soaphead Church. Raped by their own and raped by strangers. Ulitmately, Pecola is raped because she is ugly, and she is ugly because she is the antithesis of "America the beautiful." She represents the ugly secret that lies beneath the Shirley Temple cup. Claudia comes closest in recognizing the inevitable metamorphosis of every black child:

> Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was my friend . . .what I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world . . . (14)

Claudia disdainfully notes the imposition of this icon on herself and her sister, Frieda, at Christmas. The important, the special gift was a big, rigid, blue-eyed Shirley Temple-like doll with "round moronic eyes, pancake face, and orangeworms hair . . . [and] all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. 'Here,' they said, 'this is beautiful, and if you are on this day "worthy" you may have it'" (13). Claudia admits that the embers of her loathing compelled her to mutilate and dismember these dolls. But the true horror, she confesses, was the transference of these same impulses to white girls. She says, "The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so" (15). Finally, she is repelled by this "disinterested violence." She is repulsed not by the violence, but by the disinterest. And she concludes that the best hiding place is love: "Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (16).

Shirley Temple and the Shirley Temple cup represent a secret, an ugly secret. This is the standard by which society measures worth and value. The first violation against these young black children is to require, at any cost, that they accept this as the quintessential standard by which their value will be measured. The second violation is that society then despoils the spirits of these children as they inevitably fail to measure up to this standard.

As Morrison allows Claudia to articulate, this is a much more insidious offense than merely charging white society of subjugating the black society. The mythos is so systemically embraced and internalized that we witness black men and women violating black men, women and children of their individuality, their value, their worth. Mothers give their daughters Shirley Temple dolls, adults and children alike measure their superiority by gradations in their color, and fathers—in their impotent rage—rape their daughters.

Regardless of whether it is a rape of domination or a rape of alienation, regardless of whether it is a violation of the body or of the spirit, regardless of our claimed innocence of silence, we are all complicit. We share in the violation. We, white or black; we, rich or poor; we all share the guilt of commission and of omission. Morrison is clear in this admonition: "All of us . . . felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health . . . Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt" (163), or so we are able to persuade ourselves.

Morrison reinforces and advances her themes in her use of the Dick and Jane story, the happy household where strife is a foreign entity. Clearly, the Shirley Temple cup and the happy household Dick and Jane myth belong to a stratum of morally righteous and compassionately indifferent Americans. Parameters of acceptability and value well-established, this is an echelon that is underwritten by an economically comfortable existence and aestheticized to a particular vision of beauty and truth.

Middle-class, white America often seeks refuge in saying, "Back then . . ." and "Over there . . ." The distance these phrases create keep our world safe and comfortable. Morrison disturbs that comfort. She brings us to the here and the now. In fact, her themes are so close that they require an examination of unprecedented intimacy. As we begin to deconstruct character and motive, we discover their unwitting complicity. We come to understand the complexity of Cholly's entrapment. This understanding does not absolve him of his abhorrent violence against his daughter, but as we juxtapose Pecola's rape and Cholly's reaction to Darlene when they are discovered and humiliated by the white men, we come to understand that Cholly's violation of Pecola had nothing to do with love, or sex, or lust; it was a contorted act of violence stemming from an impotent rage which may only turn in on itself.

It is not untypical of white America to dismiss the Chollys of the world with righteous censure: "If only he'd go out and get a job . . ." ; "He is just as free and you and me . . ."; "Obviously, he doesn't care . . ." **The Bluest Eye** invites us to witness the soft underbelly of our circumspect opacity—our comfortable condemnations, our preferred ignorance. It invites us to penetrate the impermeable sac of cultural subjugation. If and when we accept

this invitation, we come to understand the self-loathing that the dominant, white, Anglo-Saxon culture can engender and can inculcate: as a culture black America stands accused for their failure to prosper. We, as a prospering white culture, provide a yardstick against which worth, value, dignity, success, and happiness are measured which creates false, superficial, incongruous, and impossible standards. We have institutionalized beauty, money, and status. We assume freedom and equality as blithely as we assume subjugation and inequality. This appears a somewhat dubious contradiction when it is first proposed. However, with a bit of chewing, we come to recognize ourselves in these convoluted relationships.

We are impaled by Morrison's Dick and Jane metaphor. We are struck, as Morrison introduces each Chapter of the novel with an excerpt from Dick and Jane, that this story of Dick, Jane, Spot living happily, harmoniously, and prosperously with Mother and Father in a tidy little house surrounded by a white picket fence is the public school basal reader for primary grade school children in America. All primary grade school children in America. It occurs to us that it has been institutionalized in the Petri dish of American education to "grow" more Dicks and Janes. That is, this story "innocently" institutionalizes the myth. And yet, with each Chapter, we witness the structural erosion of the story as we witness the cultural erosion of the myth that it represents within the story itself. There is no pretty little house: "The only thing in the Breedloves' house was a coal stove" (27). Dick couldn't play: "He [Sammy, Pecola's brother] was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times" (32). Jane was not happy: "She [Pecola] struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other [her parents], and a profound wish that she herself could die" (32).

As the myth devolves, the metaphor galvanizes our understanding of the whoring of the American Dream for a huge contingent of our society. Capitalism is the sugar daddy. Who are the pimps? What of the sacredness of our guaranteed rights as a community of citizens, sharing one flag, sharing one oath of allegiance, sharing one land? These are the questions that Morrison leaves to us. She require us to examine the ugliness that lies just beneath the skin of America the beautiful, the verdant land of opportunity, the land where all are free to grow up to be . . . And she requires us to ask some very difficult questions.

She does not prescribe a panacea for the dystopian ills of American society, of the American dream. Yet, the novel does have intrinsic and extrinsic prescriptive value. Beyond the literary merit of language and style, it has the capacity and the power to surface those substantive issues that permeate our lives. This is a novel that can shape our incredulity, can incite our rage, can invite our moral indignation. It offers up conflict, injustice, inequity, abuse, prejudice, intolerance and inhumanity for our critical examination.

Work Cited

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